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Negotiating Normative Expectations, Problematic Sustainability and Disempowerment: The Conflicting Realities of Participation Practices in the Estonian Civil Society

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Abstract

Participation is a right held by all community members to engage in decision-making processes. The negotiation power of individuals and interest groups expressed through participatory practices is especially valuable in a young democracy with a short history of civil society and community initiative. Researching participation opens new perspectives into local agency and helps to identify various powers and ideologies in action. Estonian civil society has made notable progress since the country regained its independence, but participatory practices have neither improved in quality nor increased in volume. Furthermore, previous research indicates a discrepancy between normative expectations and empirical reality. This paper draws on a comparative study from 2016 and examines the differences between the Estonian non-profit and the public sectors' experiences and expectations regarding participation practices. The qualitative content analysis method was employed on the interviews conducted with a total 65 public and third sector representatives. The results are contextualised through critical theories of participation which regard participation as a complex, multidimensional and strongly ideologised solution. The study concludes that the promises of empowerment typical to the mainstream participation rhetoric are yet to be rooted in the practices of participation in Estonian civil society, where instead the repeating motif in the participatory experience is disempowerment.

Key words: civil society, Estonia, participation studies, secondary qualitative research, qualitative content analysis.

Introduction

The Estonian society, like other post-socialist countries, has gone through rapid changes since regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The progress of the Estonian civil society has particularly stood out among Eastern bloc countries and received a considerable amount of positive attention. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the civil society in Estonia has been developing on a slightly different path compared to its Western European counterparts. Also, as previous research has demonstrated, in many Eastern European countries a well-functioning civil society has not yet been achieved (Howard, 2003; Lane, 2010; Lagerspetz, 2018).

Civil society and civil society organisations (CSOs) have proven to be a valuable balancing and democratising power situated between the citizens and the state. But now, for more than a decade researchers have been discussing the evident crisis of such traditional vision (Mercer, 2000; Kaldor, 2003; Srinivas 2009). Civil society and civil society organisations are going through a number of crucial changes in how they function, while being challenged by the declining numbers of organisations and membership, diminishing diversity in activities and goals, and shorter life-spans. Research on civil society in post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe has also not been problem free (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003; Killingsworth, 2012) and trails behind the changes happening within the civil society.

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Against the backdrop of such challenges, and in the context of weakening democracy, the relationship between the civil society and the public sector deserves more detailed scrutiny. Therefore, this article aims to explore the relationship between the CSOs and the public sector in Estonia by analysing their experiences and expectations with the participatory practices in public policy making. On the one hand, strong and active participation practices are one of the means to empower civil society, but they can also be viewed as an indicator for interpreting the viability of democratic principles in the society in general. Despite the notable progress of the Estonian civil society during the last decade, participatory practices have not equally improved in quality or increased in volume. Since the 2000s, various researchers (Lepa et al., 2004; Rikmann et al., 2007; Lagerspetz, 2000; Lagerspetz et al., 2000; Lagerspez, 2018) have identified the scarcity of both participatory practices and resources and low rates of association membership. These are especially low compared to the civil societies in Western and Northern Europe – role models for the institutionalisation processes of the Estonian civil society throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. The data available from various studies tells us about contrary trends in the civic-public partnerships. Regular measurements (Rikmann et al., 2010; 2014) have shown a notable decrease in the number of the CSOs sustaining long-term collaboration relationships, from 60% in 2009-2010 to 42% five years later.

This empirical data is in contrast with the contemporary discourse of the Estonian civil society, which has been vigorously dominated by two complementary forces: public rhetorics that idealise participatory practices, and the growing number of normative policy documents and official guidelines that reflect the participation-related expectations set for the civil society and the non-profit sector (Estonian Civil Society Development Concept, Development Plan for Civic Initiative Support 2007-2010, Estonian Civil Society Development Plan 2011-2014, Estonian Civil Society Development Plan 2015-2020). Hence, previous research results indicate a discrepancy between normative expectations and empirical reality and motivate the present, more detailed study on the subject. Previous research (Praxis, 2004; Lepa et al., 2004; Rikmann et al., 2007; Lagerspetz, 2000; Lagerspetz et al., 2000; Rikmann et al., 2009) gives reason to suspect that despite official guidelines the public and the third sector interpret the functionality and meaning of the concepts and, therefore, practices of participation and cooperation differently.

By introducing the results of a comparative study carried out in 2016, this paper will examine the differences between the third sector's and the public sector's diverging experiences and expectations in relation to participation practices in Estonian civil society. First, the paper will provide a short overview of the historic development of civil society in Estonia and the trends in the civic-public relationship after regaining independence. It is followed by a summary of critical theoretical approaches of the participatory practices relevant for the following analysis. The description of the data, the data collection and analysis methods are introduced in "Data and Methods". The results of the analysis are contextualised through critical theories of participation and discussed in "Research Findings and Discussion".

Civil Society in Estonia: Setting the Context

When freedom of association was re-established in 1989 and the country regained independence in 1991, the society lacked institutional structure and practical knowledge crucial for building a functional civil society. Freedom of association had been abolished when Estonia was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940. Therefore, in the 1990s, civil society in the immature democracy faced two major challenges. The society had to undergo a process of 'de-nationalization' and the legitimation of pluralist world views (Rikmann & Kitsnik, forthcoming). As the legal framework for both the state and the civil society had to be created from scratch, the 1990s have been described by somewhat of a legal anomie (Rikmann, 2012). However, by the second half of the decade most of the fundamental legislation for CSOs was in place, and the civil society in Estonia could be considered institutionalised (Rikmann, 2012).

In the 1990s, a typical non-governmental organisation in Estonia was small, with a short history, and was mainly concerned with their members' interests – a pattern corresponding to the experiences from other Eastern Europe countries. Most organisations at the time lacked the ambition to deal with the more general issues other than their everyday functioning, and even fewer attempted to develop the suitable environment for civic initiative or advocate for broader needs in the society (Rikmann, 2012, p. 53-54). By contrast, the civil society organisations established after the turn of the century were better organised and equipped to adapt to the changing conditions of the unconsolidated civil society (Rikmann, 2012).

After the first studies of the civil society in the late 1990s and the beginning of 2000s, it became clear that "those who speak of civil society" speak a different language and it was evident that important issues such as empowerment, advocacy, citizens' participation and interest representation had not yet been substantially debated (Rikmann, 2012, p. 59-60). The need for a shared language proved to be especially indispensable in the relationship between the civil society organisations and the public sector. The consolidation process of the civic-public relationship went through several stages, marked by a number of dissents. The 1990s were particularly challenging as the function and the role of the civil society and its position in the relationship with the state was far from unambiguously understood and motivated heated debates (Mänd et al., 2000; Siplane, 2001; Laius, 2002; Rikmann & Kitsnik forthcoming).

In the 2000s, one of the key drivers behind the cooperation between the two sectors was motivated by the marketisation of public services (Lagerspetz, Ruutsoo & Rikmann, 2000; Randma-Liiv et al., 2008), which was paired with the strong dependency of CSOs on public funding. To consolidate the civic-public relationships, the government has included collaboration in the delivery of public services into the agendas of many strategic plans and policy papers (Estonian Ministry of Interior Affairs, Estonian Civil Society Development Concept). Furthermore, promotion and implementation of participatory practices has also been written into legally binding guidelines, where participatory activities are expected to take various forms. For example, information insemination, consultation, empowerment, collaboration initiatives, interest group representation and public consultation (Estonian Civil Society Development Concept; Development Plan for Civic Initiative Support 2007-2010; Estonian Civil Society Development Plan 2011-2014; Estonian Civil Society Development Plan 2015-2020; Kübar & Hinsberg 2014). These policy documents and guidelines were focused on limited types of institutionalised organisations and contributed to the growing differentiations between institutionalised organisations and short-term, non-formal associations.

Undoubtedly, accession to the EU has had a direct effect on the development of policymaking and the adaption of participatory practices for all the CEE countries. However, it has not resulted in a unified nature of the civil society and civic-public relationships in the region (Vandor et al., 2017). In addition to the accession to the EU, the characteristics of civil societies in the region have depended on many factors, among which the tradition of civic initiative, acceptance of pluralist values, volatility of the political arena and the speed of economic growth have proven to be crucial. Some of those aspects have been favourable for Estonia and have helped rapidly Europeanise the policymaking processes. Nonetheless, despite the initial rapid improvements, the progress might have peaked and could now be generating false confidence in inclusive policymaking instead.

Theoretical background

The Tyranny of Participation

Participatory approaches first appeared in the 1960s as a counteraction triggered by the disappointment and disillusionment with the orthodox development theories and 'top down' approaches (Penderis, 2014). Packaged as an alternative solution, they gained even further popularity in the 1970s and 1980s. By the 1980s and 1990s, it was already widely acknowledged among critical social scientists and development practitioners alike that local people should not be handled as passive receivers of the assistance because they have a central role in changing their

own circumstances and contributing to the decision-making processes (Sinwell, 2010).

'Participation' initially justified itself as a useful development tool on the conceptual level but soon various problems emerged and gave reasons for the critical review of the participation concept itself (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2006; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Crewe & Harrison 1998). The criticism addressed the three main weaknesses of mainstream participation ideology: its dogmatic, dominating and depoliticising impacts. Cook and Kothari (2001) introduced the metaphor of tyranny into the critical discussion: the everyday use of the word 'tyranny' associates with the illegal and unfair use of power and, therefore, helps to draw attention to the interlaced relationship between participation and power. The same reasoning informs the typology of three types of tyranny represented by the mainstream participatory practices (Cook & Kothari, 2001; Christens & Speer, 2006).

The first type is prevalent in the rhetoric and practices of international agencies and donors and is articulated through the rights to control the decision-making processes. It is also based on the claim that the promotion of traditional forms of participation emphasises the benefits of 'bottom-up' decision-making processes. The critics (Cook & Kothari, 2001; Christens & Speer, 2006) argue against such claims and point out that as long as international agencies and donors focus on the utility and sustainability of the goals and objectives set by themselves, the 'top-down' planning will remain unaltered despite all the pro-participation rhetorics. This in turn leads to the issues rising from the second type, domination. Accepting participation in the prescribed form comes with the acceptance of prescribed goals and values, which in turn minimises the potential for real dialogue and alternative solutions (Cook & Kothari, 2001; Christens & Speer, 2006). The third type of tyranny is the tendency of participation practices to obscure and blur the restrictions to tackle the pre-existing power relationships.

The depoliticising effect of mainstream participation does not stop there. One object and focus of mainstream participation methods is the local community and its idealised image. Williams (2004) points out how such a community, created in the framework of the participation rhetoric, relates to two different sets of depoliticisation issues. First, participation practitioners have a tendency to simplify the spatial conditions of the communities and prefer to see them and their prescribed spaces as singular, self-evident, uncontested and problem-free. A 'village' is a classic example: at first sight, a bounded community with easily identified and uncontested memberships. However, this view ignores the fact that 'the community' is often the development project's own making, where the terms and conditions of the project and donors will perpetuate arbitrary spatial divisions and ignore its power effects. Those who do not fit into easily demarcated and territorial 'communities' can all too easily fall foul of visions of development, participatory or otherwise (Williams, 2004, p. 561). Second, by idealising a community's values and actions and not accepting the social values as the outcome of internalised power relationships, they are simplified into merely parts of the local culture. Therefore, the critique-free approach to the results of the participatory activities will mask communities' repressive micro and macro level power structures such as gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. Homogenising the community and privileging the site of activity contribute to the depoliticising effects of the discourse (Williams, 2004, p. 562-563).

Participation as a Spatial Practice

The notion of space provides us with a tool to visualise several abstract but from the civil society's point of view important practical outcomes of participatory activities. Considering participation as a spatial practice provides the means to acknowledge the constructed nature of power and citizenship present in every public site of participation (Cornwall, 2004a). Various studies (Cornwall, 2004a; 2004b; Cornwall & Coelho, 2006) discuss two differentiated participatory spaces: 'invited space' and 'popular space'. Both appear in numerous variations, each emphasising a particular nuance of conceptual importance – agency, hierarchy and the role of power structures. All these different versions of participatory spaces are in a dynamic relationship with one another and never static or empty(ied) of social relationships (Penderis, 2012, p. 11).

'Invited spaces' are identified as environments created by the government as demanded by the public, requested by donors or prescribed by policy changes. Some are temporary in their nature, opening up only for short-term consultation and communication, but closed down after officials and professionals return to their day-to-day duties. Long-term 'invited spaces' often take the form of regulated institutions. They sometimes come to life due to the reforms inside the sector and persist with the help of interest groups and officials sharing their management (Cornwall, 2004a). Power institutions have a tendency to ascribe the participation monopoly to such 'invited spaces' and recognise them as the only valid environment for participatory activities (Miraftab, 2006, p. 195). In the case of Estonia, one of these regulating powers is expressed by the funding criteria set for civil society, whereby only institutionalised CSOs qualify for donor funding. One of the characteristics of the 'invited spaces' is a strong relationship with policymaking and institutional design.

Using professional bureaucrats and specialists as proxies for the government highlights the problematics of agency and accountability and, therefore, can undermine the overall transformative impact of the activities. Problems can present as the lack of political commitment and irregular attendance from certain officials – all relating back to the lack of ownership of the process. There can also be issues with the questionability of representation and leadership. Who speaks for which group and how are representation rights decided and negotiated? Are such negotiations binding by nature and who is accountable for the follow-through? All this can potentially undermine the legitimacy of the participating civil society organisations and turn such 'invited spaces' into 'nobody's spaces'. Those empty and passive spaces lack basic ownership and never fulfil their full potential. Instead of mobilising citizens they will demobilise them (Cornwall, 2004a). Cornwall (2004a; 2004b) was one of the first to claim that one of the goals of 'invited spaces' is to subject marginalised groups to the existing power and maintain neoliberal hegemony. By articulating such critique and considering both positive and negative aspects of the role of power, she offers a deeper view into the wider theoretical debate about participation. But she also reminds us that despite the challenges, ingparticipatory spaces are social arenas were communities are equipped with the potential to change policies, discourses and development practices.

'Popular spaces' are arenas where people gather on their own initiative, either to protest, offer services, or maintain solidarity and cooperation. Similarly to 'invited spaces', the 'popular spaces' are being institutionalised and regulated as well. Nonetheless, they have more alternative versions as they empower people for citizen-resistance and share values and focus. The borders between the two types of participation spaces are contingent and more likely changeable than permanent (Cornwall, 2004a, p. 2; 2004b, p. 76).

Promises of Empowerment

One of the pervasive and recurring elements of the participation discourse is the promise of grass-roots empowerment. Empowerment plays a central role in the participation rhetoric and often uncritically concludes that empowerment, paired with openness and transparency, is the main outcome of participation. When participation appeared as the new "positive programme", it revolved around the rhetorics stating that participatory methods provide development processes their power, make them more democratic, equal and effective (Chambers, 1997; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). It also claimed that participatory methods were levelling out power differences between professional development specialists and the local people, and had the power to change participants' lives (Christens & Speer, 2006). Kothari (2001) has been very distrustful about such claims and points out the disparity between promises and outcomes. He claims that by emphasising the participation of marginalised individuals and groups, they will become even more closely related subjects to the power structures and will lose the potential to oppose them. As a result, and similarly to 'inviting spaces', instead of achieving empowerment, the local people are used for legitimating top-down decisions (Kothari, 2001, p. 143-145).

Applying these critical theories to participatory practices in the framework of civil society discourse in Estonia allows us to explore the complex, multidimensional and strongly ideologized nature of

civic-public participatory spaces. Critical theories of participation are utilised to focus on and interpret the relationship between participation and power relations, the space that constitutes it, and normative theoretical concepts and practices in the experiences of Estonian CSOs and the public sector.

Data and Research Method

To explore the differences between the experiences and expectations of participation among Estonian CSOs and the public sector, qualitative content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000) was applied to semi-structured focus group interviews conducted with 27 public sector and 38 third sector representatives. The interview data used in the analysis was secondary data and originally collected as part of a large-scale research project "Institutionalisation of Civic Initiative in Estonia 2014" (Rikmann et al., 2014), carried out by the Centre for the Study and Development of Civil Society at Tallinn University in 2014.

A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were carried out by a team of interviewers in various locations across Estonia. The team conducted 9 group interviews and 1 individual interview with people from various types of CSOs (both local and national), active in various spheres. The sample was geographically representative, gender balanced, and included both bigger and smaller CSOs. 7 group interviews and 1 individual interview was carried out with officials working in the public sector (local governments, ministries, governmental organisations). Public sector representatives were recruited by phone and half of the officials contacted agreed to participate. All the officials who agreed to the interviews had regular professional contacts with the CSOs. To achieve regional representation, 8 interviews were conducted in Tallinn and 10 interviews took place in various locations across Estonia. Purposive sampling methods were used and the final number of interviews was decided upon saturation. The average length of an interview was 1.5 hours. Interviews were based on slightly differing interview guides tailored for each sector. Interview guides are available in the original report (Rikmann et al., 2014).

The main focus of the interviews during the original study "Institutionalisation of Civic Initiative in Estonia 2014" (Rikmann et al., 2014, 96-97) was the inclusion of CSOs into the consultations on preparing public funding measures for CSOs. It was the first time when the parties' different understandings of participatory activities and the recognition of the discursive normativity of participation clearly emerged. However, as participation was not the central focus of the original study, these themes were not analysed at the time.

In correspondence with one of the functions of secondary qualitative analysis (Heaton, 2004, p. 9-10), new objectives and research questions were applied. I selected segments from the data that either directly discussed participatory activities or touched on important topics whose relevance was discussed in the theory. Preliminary coding was made using the qualitative data analysis programme MAXQDA. Coding was carried out solely by the author and the results and analysis process was later cross-validated by researchers involved in the original data collection and analysis. The analysis process was grounded (Bazeley, 2013; Heaton 2004) in critical participation theories and the hierarchical code tree was assembled of *a priori* deductive codes and their sub-codes. Some additional codes and their sub-codes were data driven and inductive. An assembled coding tree was applied to the transcribed interview data. This approach permitted additional categories for studying the latent content and recreation of contexts, multiple revisions of codes and categories. No systematic attention was paid to the frequency of the categories and codes and only used for expressing pseudo-quantitative estimations.

Research Findings and Discussion

The research findings in this section are presented through the most prominent categories that emerged from the analysis process. These categories are: the characteristics of the civic-

public participatory spaces, the relationship between the knowledge and agency and the interrelatedness of empowerment and disempowerment. I will compare how informants from the public sector and the CSOs interpret their experiences in the participatory spaces, negotiate the participation conditions, and contextualise participation through critical participatory theories and the characteristics of Estonian civil society discourse.

Characteristics of Public-Civic Participatory Spaces

"Cooperation can't become a goal in and of itself"

As both the state building and the creation of the civil society in Estonia took place as top-down projects, the independence from the state has proven to be challenging for institutionalised CSOs. Therefore, it is not particularly surprising that the spaces for participation are mostly initiated and maintained by the public sector. In the critical theories of participation, these spaces were described as invited spaces (Cornwall, 2004a). In Estonia, these spaces facilitate a number of various activities such as supervision, monitoring, assigning services, consultation, collecting input from the interest groups, etc. All of which and more are prescribed by official normative guidelines for both sectors (Estonian Civil Society Development Concept; Development Plan for Civic Initiative Support 2007-2010; Estonian Civil Society Development Plan 2011-2014; Estonian Civil Society Development Plan 2015-2020; Kübar & Hinsberg, 2014). Some of these activities reproduce pre-existing power hierarchies (Gaventa, 2006; Coelho, 2006), while others represent power relationships based on specialised and restricted knowledge, where the officials take on the roles of experts. Both of these manifestations of power constitute the recurring backdrop for the following analysis.

When approached with questions on participatory practices, the public sector representatives found that those spaces were mainly perceived as contact points for goal-oriented interaction with the CSOs. For instance, when a new law is created or old one revised in Estonia, public officials are obliged to ask for input from relevant interest group representatives – usually in the form of CSOs. One interviewed official described such processes as a "*check-up procedure if everything matches our* [public sector] *objectives…*" (public sector informant).

In such cases, the agency of the activities firmly lies with the public sector – they usually do the *inviting* and choose the talking points. When involving a CSO into legally prescribed *invited* participatory spaces, the public sector is free to prescribe a threshold. Very often the comprehension of normative expectations is set as a prerequisite for participation. For CSOs, understanding such normative formalities is, of course, directly connected to their level of professionalisation. Historically, the organisations created after the turn of the century for whom foreign funding was available became better organised. This was part of a general trend that resulted in an increased differentiation of the civil sector (Rikmann & Keedus, 2012), where professionalisation was attributed only to a small minority of the organisations.

When including CSO representatives in participatory activities, officials observe and make judgements on their comprehension of the *rules of the game*. However, those who are invited and included might not always understand the rules and expectations set upon them, while the quality of the results is assessed and the decisions on their future inclusion is decided.

> *"When we are making a new development plan for the city, we have included all kinds of NGOs* [into the planning process]. *In that way they are being included. But when judging the quality of participation, how much do they contribute to the processes? Some do it more, some less. Often very different types of people meet at those tables. Some complain more than the others. Much depends on their focus, whether they are focused on the outcomes or the reasons."* (public sector informant)

Therefore, when professionalisation is expected from the CSOs, and they are judged on their responsiveness to the goals initiated by the public sector, the CSOs' true potential gets overlooked. Nevertheless, they are still expected to be responsible for the resulting outcomes.

Role of Locality and Informal Communication

Invited participatory spaces and experiences therein are tightly intertwined with locality. Participatory relationships mainly occur between a CSO and a municipality under whose jurisdiction a particular organisation is registered. Such jurisdictional location constitutes the origin for the organisation's spatial identity. At times, experiences in those spaces are problematic, for example, for the CSO informants the material aspects of such relationship often prevail over the potential ideological change. A local municipality is perceived as a source for resources, either in the form of direct and preferably regular financial support or as donors of equipment, supplies and activity spaces. It is worth pointing out that Estonian CS funding is highly dependent on governmental sources, notably more than in old democracies, and this dependency on public money only increased after the global financial crisis in 2008.

The aspect of locality goes hand-in-hand with informal interaction and proves to be a multifaceted issue. On the one hand, informal interaction in the participatory theory is encouraged and interpreted as a tool for achieving bottom-up goals. On the other hand, as observed in the same sources, local relationships also represent local power relations. In many situations, distinguishing formal and informal interaction can be highly problematic for the participants. In Estonia's context, particularly in smaller municipalities, same people might represent a locally active CSO while simultaneously working as a local public servant. As for understanding formal expectations, officials prefer to include CSOs who share this common language. This tendency is one of the characteristics of Estonian civil society in rural areas and, obviously, carries potential for conflict of interest. However, not once was such an arrangement identified by the interviewees as a possible setting for corruption.

In other situations, the possible benefits of alternative informal interaction are not necessarily recognised. From a public servant's point of view, informal communication is interpreted as a potential distraction from their assigned work tasks. Again, public sector informants express preference for goal-based action, where goals and targets are formulated by the public sector in contrast to showing openness to listening to suggestions from the CSOs.

> "[While talking about communication between the sectors]… *is for this or that kind of objective. When we're in the process of creating a new rule or planning a new service, then we will tell* [the representatives of TS] *what we want to achieve. That kind of let's do it general cooperation, that doesn't reach me. What do they* [TS] *expect from me? That we just sit down and talk? Well, when we have some kind of practical goal, then we reach out and collaborate. And if we don't have it, then we don't do it. We work, so to speak, in sections. We know that they work and they know that we work and sometimes we interact"* (public sector informant)

and

> *"Cooperation can't become a goal in and of itself. We see it as needs-based and if there is no particular need we will not make an effort to start a cooperation relationship. I don't think this topic needs any further investigation."* (public sector informant)

This leads to the question of representation: who gets included in what kind of decision-making processes? As we have seen, public sector workers set the level of professionalism as the threshold for inclusion. CSO representatives do recognise potential problems rising and argue that the inclusion of people unrelated to the field in the decision-making processes is not always clear and justified. They express an ideal that the decision-making right should be given to those who have stronger real-life experiences on the field and a relationship with the target group.

> *"The people in the committees should be the people who write the projects. And they should rotate every year: more than 50% should be new every year. People who are really familiar with their topic and they would rotate every year. And nobody could vote on their own project. They would have to recuse themselves."* (CSO informant)

Such criticism highlights the interrelation of policy-making and institutional style applied in the invited spaces. Which, in turn, relates to the lack of ownership, questionability of representation and leadership of the participation process. As Cornwall (2004a) warned, this can undermine the legitimacy of the participating CSOs and turn such 'invited spaces' into 'nobody's spaces'.

Short-term vs Long-term Collaboration

Longevity of cooperation in public-civic relationships has been observed to be an issue in Estonian CS since its very beginning. For example, data (Rikmann et al., 2010; 2014) collected as part of regular extensive studies conducted on Estonian CSOs once every four years, shows a sharp decrease in the number of the civil society organisations' sustained long-term cooperation relationships. In 2009-2010, 60% of the CSOs had some kind of cooperation with the local government and other organisations; this number dropped down to 42% five years later. In the interview data, I found that in addition to the normative expectations, public sector representatives appeared to attach special value to the long-term cooperation relationships.

> *"As a rule of thumb, short-term cooperation doesn't evolve into a long-term one. The [long-term] ones that we have were created to be long-term, right from the beginning. Short-term ones only fulfil short-term goals."* (public sector informant)

Similarly to the public sector, the third sector values formalised relationships but in contrast emphasises the pragmatic aspects of such arrangements. Official cooperation agreements are valued especially highly and attaining them is interpreted as a marker of an organisational quality and used as a visibility enhancer to improve their position among competitors, in networking and outreach. Therefore, at times these official agreements work as a PR tool for CSOs. The third sector representatives also ascribe to the official cooperation agreements the potential to overcome possible obstructions set by the political forces active in the field. On one hand, those relationships seem to offer more possibilities to grow organisationally, but they also contain several serious predicaments. First of all, the relationships reinforce the tendency for paternalism. Second, they could force a CSO to drop their original priorities and adapt the ones of the state.

> "[Talking about formal cooperation agreements]… *We achieved them because we go and socialise and we do feel like we are strategic partners to them* [the public sector]. *It could be also expressed in an official agreement. That would make it transparent, that way others also know that we are strategic partners and organisations would know what they have to do to become one. At the moment, the situation is that whoever talks better and becomes friends with someone, becomes their strategic partner. But still, that doesn't mean that there will be an official contract and a sense of security about the future. It's more like at the moment we have it but we don't know what comes next. We constantly need to consider the changing* [political] *positions and attitudes…"* (CSO informant)

In addition, as general funding for CSOs is decreasing, the number of less institutionalised associations are trending, as more hybrid forms of social action increase. Such types of associations have less chances to find formal support from the public sector.

Digital Participatory Spaces

A growing amount of civic activity is moving into online environments and in the long run will change how civil society functions. In the context of participation, digital space carries a potential to become a subcategory of invited space and illustrates well one of the aspects relating to problems branching from such a major change. Digital participatory spaces can at times widen

the gap between the CS activists who feel confident navigating online spaces and (potential) CS activists who will never be included (because they lack the necessary ICT skills). A similar divide will present itself between public servants and activists. Estonia is a country where both the state and entrepreneurial levels highlight and promote digital savviness and availability of online services for all residents. In practice, this means that all the official interaction with the state is expected to be done mainly through digital channels. Although there was plenty of support for civil society ICT competency in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, resources have dwindled by now. For public servants, the accessibility to digital tools and ICT skills seemed self-evident, but for the CSO it can at times become a serious obstacle.

> *"When NGOs don't have paid employees and the rules for writing a project have become so complicated, all these digital conditions… where are all the measures to help us with the IT equipment? There have been none. But everyone has to send in the documents the same way [digitally] and sign them digitally… How should NGOs be able to do all that work without pay… No small village association can take a leap necessary to take on such projects, because of either finances or skills."* (CSO informant)

The age of CSO representatives is related to their ICT skills. In addition, smaller and temporary organisations in particular lack resources to invest into digital solutions such as software updates, access to using digital signature (the main form of identification for online governmental services in Estonia) and a well-maintained website. Failing to provide these things can negatively influence CSO's interaction with the public sector and minimise their credibility when they look to further collaboration and long-term cooperation.

Negotiating Professional Knowledge and Agency

The rhetoric supporting more traditional forms of participation is based on the claims that the use of local knowledge helps to carry out wider changes and bottom-up processes have the capacity to change top-down organisations. Knowledge should be interpreted as the outcome of local social relationships reflecting local power relationships and not as a separate commodity (Cook & Kothari, 2001; Gaventa, 2006). Drawing from these ideas, I examined how both sectors recognise, utilise and negotiate the knowledge of the interest groups in participatory activities.

The civil society organisations indicated three prerequisites necessary for being accepted by the public sector: general organisational visibility in the field, well-functioning information channels, and familiarity with normative expectations. As discussed earlier, familiarity with formal norms is related to the professionalisation of the civil society. Estonian CSOs have made considerable progress in professionalising and their efforts were funded first by foreign donors and then by the state and the EU. But the professionalisation has proven to be highly problematic and has brought to light several pitfalls. Namely, it has resulted in a differentiation inside the civil society, and exploring experiences with participatory activities illustrates how the public sector amplifies these differences.

The interview data showed that implementing (local) knowledge is not a straightforward process. First of all, finding out about the existence of the knowledge can be challenging and the smaller the CSO, the more disadvantaged they are. This resonates with the empirical data indicating that smaller CSOs are less prepared for partnerships with other sectors (Rikmann et al., 2010; 2014). The CSO representatives recognise their responsibility to raise visibility on the field and the smaller organisations are particularly aware of this pressure.

> *"It's possible that sometimes we* [third and public sector organisations] *just don't know about each other's existence. The ones who should include us don't know whom to include, and vice versa, we don't know that we could be included."* (CSO informant)
> *"Or they don't know how to include us in the right way, or they use the wrong channels and eventually don't reach us."* (CSO informant)

> *"The bigger* [organisations]*, the ones that are better known, get included but some others are left out. And that brings us back to the topic that we* [NGOs] *have to introduce ourselves better."* (CSO informant)

For the third sector, recognition and praise from the outside, especially from the public sector, is very important and experienced as a sign of self-worth, which motivates and supports the organisational identity. At the same time, a lack thereof causes notable existential dilemmas. The third sector's self-image and identity issues are related to the public sector's tendency to place special value on professional knowledge. The general professionalisation of the third sector and its knowledge is considered by the public sector as something especially desirable and it enhances collaboration. Professionalisation is expected from both the organisations and the services they offer. The latter is particularly important due to the expanding marketisation of public services happening ostensibly since the 2000s.

The public officials contrast professional knowledge with the emotional relationship with the field, downplaying the importance of the latter and claiming that for successful functioning it is insufficient. In some cases, the officials do not recognise that collecting and implementing local knowledge is a multi-step process and, therefore, remain content with the more declarative forms of participation. Those who recognise the lengthy process and apply it, emphasise the importance of good relations and good communication. However, they still look at participation primarily from the standpoint of the public sector and, therefore, more often than not don't grant the third sector real agency to implement real change.

Disempowerment over Empowerment

Relying on the theoretical framework, which is critical of the promises of empowerment central to the mainstream participation discourse, I observed different factors that support and undermine conditions for empowerment in the lived experiences of the CSO representatives. One of the factors that stood out is the emotional connection with the field, which results in the increased contributions of time and resources. The third sector representatives often expressed personal pride in their contributions and successful outcomes of their work, and through that experienced a sense of empowerment on a personal level.

> *"Now, working for this NGO over 10 years, I have been thinking that people who are active at the NGOs contribute so much of their personal energy, their knowledge and time. Much more than somebody on the regular paid job - no matter if it's a sales person or teacher, or doctor or a lawyer."* (CSO informant)

Investing personal time into invited spaces is not problem free. For example, when officials schedule public consultation sessions exclusively during their office hours, which makes extensive participation impossible. Cornwall (2004a, p. 3) associates such tendencies with negative institutional design that eventually can obstruct participation and create a dangerous situation where invited space becomes 'nobody's space'.

> *"I have to say that while doing my day job, I don't have time to read all the prepared documents and go to the meetings. Now, recently we had broad-based discussions and meetings to prepare for the next funding cycle. Everybody could attend and the information is out on the internet, when and where meetings take place. I went a couple of times, but there were not many people present. They are in the middle of the working day and regular citizens are at work then. And at the same time, the officials at the Ministry of Interior Affairs stop working at 5pm and what would motivate them to work in the evenings or the weekends? I can see some problems here…"* (CSO informant)

Another recurring motif in the interviews with the third sector was individual-level feelings of inequality. The feelings of inequality and being in a weak position in heavily hierarchical

relationships lead to doubting the organisational identity, motivation and self-worth. This in turn raises questions about the equality of a partner, who lacks confidence and self-assertiveness, as well as about the effects on the experienced participation. The third sector links the question of organisational self-worth with the existence of contractual relationships as signs of trust, which become the prerequisites for experiencing empowerment. Only when the relations between the two sectors are experienced as trusting and being on equal terms, can the participatory activities have the potential to become empowering; and vice versa, distrust between the sectors creates disempowerment and minimises chances for future collaboration. An NGO employee illustrates this situation:

> *"We started when there weren't many [resources] and the external funding was running out, and in general I'm anyway suspicious about those fundings. Because every funding, for example, from the city council, means that I'm obliged to them. But I'm a stubborn type and think for myself and try to be as independent as possible. That way we can have cooperation with whoever we want: we don't have any commitments. We don't have to force ourselves on anyone."* (CSO informant)

Public officials associate empowerment rhetoric and participation practices only very circumstantially, and the predominant experience described was disempowerment. For instance, in situations where the officials feel the need to take over the potentially empowering duties and responsibilities of the third sector.

> *"We don't want the activities to become pointless. As soon as you let people become passive, next we have to take over the project management. And then we have a situation when it looks as if it's one of the city's subsidiary bodies."* (public sector informant)

Disempowerment was experienced in the invited space-type of situations, where hand-picked civil society organisations were allowed to express their opinions according to the conditions imposed by the pre-set protocols. These are the situations that contain certain potential for empowerment, but being regulated by the external power structures, they are not designed for empowerment, where the existing norms can be broken or changed. The motif of disempowerment over empowerment in the interviews indicates that the empowerment rhetoric omnipresent in the theoretical participation discourse has not yet taken root in the participation practices or rhetorics of the Estonian civil society.

Conclusion

Due to its post-socialist heritage, Estonia still struggles with issues resulting from being a young democracy and having short traditions of civic initiative. This, in turn, has led to a scarcity of participatory practices, resources and experiences. Civil society discourse in Estonia has been dominated by a rhetoric that idealises participation, and normative discourse is supported by governmental and CSO policy guidelines for good participation and engagement practices. Paired with the decreasing number of cooperation relationships between the public and the third sector, this results in a discrepancy between the normative expectations and the empirical reality. This motivated to scrutinise the participation experiences and expectations of the Estonian public sector and the CSOs in more detail.

The current political and financial climate is causing even more challenges for the civil society. By definition, civil society is expected to be more flexible and adaptable to various changes compared to the public sector, but rapidly changing conditions and expectations are posing problems for civic-public partnerships and meaningful collaborations. Applying the notion of space to participatory practices allowed to trace the power relationships and the effects of institutional design at play. In the centre of participatory rhetorics are the claims that participatory methods provide development processes their power, make them more democratic, equal and effective (Chambers, 1997; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). In the experiences of Estonian CSOs and the public sector, we encountered

issues that the critical participatory theories warn about (Cornwall, 2004a): questionability of ownership, representation, and leadership. Public sector officials utilise participatory spaces as arenas to legitimise their agenda and decision-making procedures. Informal communication outside the prescribed channels and spontaneous networking is discouraged. The preference of form over content is prevalent and professionalism is equalised with quality. CSOs are very aware of the expectations towards them, but they firmly believe in the power of formal collaboration agreements, informal networking and personal connections, which they use especially actively on the local level. In the Estonian rural areas, roles in civic-public partnerships and participatory spaces are often blurred, and people perform many roles simultaneously. This, as a result, obscures the restrictions to address the pre-existing power relationships. The same happens when CSO informants recognise the problems of transparency in the participatory spaces. The public sector informants, on the contrary, do not recognise any of the problems in the inclusion practices and perceive professionalism as a precondition to functioning cooperation. This way they amplify and reproduce already ubiquitous differentiation present inside the institutionalised civil society. I found support for the claim that accepting participation in the prescribed form comes with the acceptance of prescribed goals and values, which in turn minimises the potential for real dialogue and alternative solutions (Cook & Kothari, 2001; Christens & Speer, 2006). Mainstreamed participatory rhetorics centres around promises of empowerment through participatory practices. However, according to the current findings, despite the dominant rhetorics, this did not emerge from the experiences of the public sector and was recognised by the CSOs only to a limited extent.

Acceptance of the pluralism of world views has been a bumpy road for a post-socialist society, and as this study concluded, the acceptance of the plurality of participatory practices has not really taken root in the Estonian public-civic relationships. As the versatility of funding sources for the CS has been dwindling for a while now, the CSOs are under ever-growing pressure to subject themselves to the participatory practices prescribed by the public initiative. Hence, making them more of an extension of the public sector and forcing them to surrender their initial goals.

A generally accepted assumption regarding the civil society development practices in the CEE area has been that after providing initial support and know-how and value transfer from the foreign experts, the sector will be capable enough to take over the initiative and start reproducing those values themselves. A similar line of argumentation was also presented in the mainstreamed participation theories. However, based on the participatory experiences of the Estonian public and third sector, it seems that in reality the value formation mechanisms have not had a deep enough impact to take root and result in self-sufficient, meaningful participation practices. In addition to the impeded absorbance of value practices, the problem might also lie in the obsolete institutionalisation frameworks that acknowledge and recognise only limited types of CSOs in the participatory spaces. With changes in civil society, the characteristics of civic-public partnerships will be forced to transform. New forms of civic initiatives have been appearing for a while now and the public sector will eventually face a dilemma of whether to open themselves to more inclusive participatory spaces for non-institutionalised forms of civic initiatives.

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